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**“The Maniac Bellowed”: Queer Affect and Queer Temporality in
Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre***

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Supervisor:

Carol H. MacKay

Lisa L. Moore

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Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre***

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Carolyn Marjorie Davis, B.A.

Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2015

Dedication

To Carol MacKay and Lisa Moore, for continually making me a better writer and scholar.

For Everton Davis, for forcing me to think of bigger dreams.

And for Michael and Avonelle, for being a pretty decent set of siblings, all things considered.

Abstract

“The Maniac Bellowed”: Queer Affect and Queer Temporality in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*

Carolyn Marjorie Davis, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

Supervisor: Carol H. MacKay

Charlotte Brontë’s novel, *Jane Eyre*, is commonly read as a feminist bildungsroman in which a young woman claims her independence. In opposition to these readings, I instead choose to question the ways in which the novel’s feminist potential is elided by its simultaneous imperial project. Using the figure of Bertha Mason, I trace the ways in which Jane Eyre’s relationship with Edward Rochester is constructed through Bertha’s dehumanization in order to reassert the dominance of the healthy Anglo-European family. I examine Jane Eyre’s claims to subjectivity, alongside Bertha’s very few textual interventions, through the lens of affect theory to show the way in which Bertha Mason, rather than Jane Eyre’s mad double, represents nineteenth-century prejudices about creole bodies and undomesticated women. Finally, I engage with theories of queer temporality to read the novel in a way that makes Bertha Mason’s agency legible while also evading the novel’s troubled relationship to traditional feminist theory. I ultimately suggest that

the climactic destruction of Thornfield Hall represents a repudiation of sympathetic feminine bonds in favor of the patriarchal institutions of marriage and respectability.

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In Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), the figure of Bertha Mason is simultaneously vexed and vexing. For the characters within the novel, she functions as an impediment to the gothic romance that they are imagining for themselves. She has been seen by many critics as an important figure in Jane's feminism and that of Brontë and the novel. The reasons for such readings are numerous, but the major contention is that Bertha's symbolizes Jane Eyre's mad double. In these readings, the focus has long remained on the feminist potential of Jane and, by extension, Charlotte Brontë. My reading looks at Bertha Mason's own feminist agency, distorted and suppressed, but nonetheless legible, via a better understanding of the significance of her colonized body and her sentimental affective relationship to Jane herself. While Brontë's feminist aspirations in the text are undeniable, it is only through such a reading that we can allow Brontë's feminist work to simultaneously exist with its troubled interaction with the larger structures of imperial violence that allowed Mr. Rochester to suppress an inconvenient wife.

In this essay, I wish to question a happy ending in which the romantic hero can comfortably say, "Jane! will you hear reason?...because if you won't, I'll try violence" (258). I will argue that rather than simply Jane Eyre's mad double, Bertha Mason represents not only the complex intersections of colonialism and womanhood in the novel, but also a foremother that Jane Eyre must symbolically destroy in order to achieve her domestic dream. Due to her repeated rejections early in life from the safety of any

domestic circle, Jane's desire throughout the novel is to enact a domesticity based on egalitarian principles. However, through further investigation into the racial constructs of the transatlantic context that the novel exists within, I will show that the novel's feminist egalitarian principles only extend to those who actively give homage to and increase the sanctity of the British family. As such, Jane's transcendence is dependent on the abjection of Bertha Mason, who represents a racial contaminant that requires expurgation. By reading Jane's declarations of selfhood and Bertha's volatile interactions with the narrative through the lens of affect theory, I will show how Jane Eyre's ultimate denial of Bertha Mason is less exorcism than affective betrayal. Finally, I will turn to theories of queer temporality to find a new way of reading Bertha Mason that allows her narrative agency while avoiding the troubled relationship between the novel and traditional feminist theory.

The conversation surrounding Bertha has thus far converged in a variety of ways that I will be using to present a more cohesive view of the novel's interaction with empire and feminism. The foundational text of any reading of Jane Eyre's feminist potential is, of course, Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). Though the book is a discussion of a variety of nineteenth-century woman writers, its title is taken from their famous reading of *Jane Eyre* in the chapter "A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress." This chapter focuses on Jane and reads the narrative as a quest for feminist subjectivity. Gilbert and Gubar focus on Jane's attempts to gain equality with Rochester, who is "the only qualified critic of her soul" (352). What his qualifications are, exactly, is never really detailed. But Gilbert and Gubar do make an attempt to consider how Jane and Bertha

are positioned in relation to each other, stating that “women in Jane’s world, acting as agents for men, may be the keepers of other women. But both keepers and prisoners are bound by the same chains” (351). Unfortunately, in this discussion the only keeper is Grace Poole, while Jane occupies the same chained position as Bertha. Following this rhetorical move, Gilbert and Gubar choose to read Bertha as the insane manifestation of Jane’s anger—a dark double that haunts the house. Jane’s rage “will not be exorcised until the literal and symbolic death of Bertha frees her from the furies that torment her and makes possible a marriage of equality” (362). If we accept the image of Bertha as double, her death is, in fact, a violent fragmentation of self, yet Gilbert and Gubar see it as a necessary step for Jane’s romantic happiness and feminist self-actualization. This reading fails to account for the power struggles among Bertha’s brown body¹, Jane’s uncertain feminism, and Rochester’s masterly hand; it never considers Bertha the way it considers Jane, as a figure with individual subjectivity or rhetorical power. This marginalization only entered the critical consciousness when postcolonial critiques of Rochester’s imperial presence began to reexamine Bertha as more than symbol or archetype.

More recent arguments have attempted to address and reimagine this feminist reading. The most successful of these is Nina Baym’s “The Madwoman and her Languages; Why I Don’t Do Feminist Literary Theory” (1984). In her article, she points to the failure of feminist theorists to take a pluralistic view of the world, opting instead to define themselves against received (read: masculine) history, and ignoring the lived experience that undergirds

¹ Though I will be briefly returning to the question of Bertha’s racial identity, it will become clear that Bertha’s race is ultimately less significant to her reading than the ambiguous horror that is ascribed to her body.

the conception of theory. Speaking of the hegemonic moment of high theory in the 1980s academy, Baym states, “Today’s feminist literary theory makes asking an act of empirical anti-theory, and hence a heresy. It is finally more concerned to be theoretical than to be feminist” (46). In essence, the feminist theory reading of *Jane Eyre* requires one to become so entangled in the subjectivity of the novel’s bildungsroman that any action in service of its narrative fulfillment is read positively, even if, as Baym notes, “Jane’s rage against Rochester...is deflected to what a feminist might well see as an innocent victim” (48). For Baym, Bertha becomes the foremother that must be destroyed for the heroine to achieve selfhood; in the same way, feminist theory has betrayed its responsibility to multiplicity by searching for validation from theoretical forefathers instead. I, too, would like to reread Bertha’s existence through a lens that is both feminist and multivalent, and to do so, I will read her moments of agency in the novel to develop a livelier understanding of her role in the story. But first, I will turn to the other major locus of contention for scholars attempting to understand Bertha—her race.

That Bertha is not a native European is clear from the novel. While telling Jane his life story, Rochester states, “When I left college I was sent out to Jamaica, to espouse a bride already courted for me.” He is told that “Miss Mason was the boast of Spanish Town for her beauty,” which is a reference to her place of birth, one of the major British cities in Jamaica (Brontë 260). Her heritage in the British colonies makes her a fitting subject for postcolonial readings, but none of these readings have yet agreed on whether Bertha is of European descent, African descent, or a mixture of the two. Though she is described as “creole,” the OED definition shows that this word has had a variety of meanings, all of which have been in

simultaneous use since the seventeenth century. It can mean either “A person of black African descent born in the Caribbean or mainland Americas,” “Any person of mixed ancestry born in a country previously colonized by white Europeans,” or “A descendant of white European settlers (esp. Spanish or French) who is born in a colonized country.” As such, the postcolonial valence of her existence is extremely variable and difficult to plot. Those who read her as black consider her body as the literal embodiment of Rochester’s imperial complicity.

Those, like Gayatri Spivak, who read her as a white woman see her as a liminal interpretive space. Spivak states that “Bertha’s function in *Jane Eyre* is to render indeterminate the boundary between human and animal and thereby to weaken her entitlement under the spirit, if not the letter of the law” (249). Her selfhood is directly determined by the politics of imperialism, and she is, at all times, caught within it. Spivak then posits that Bertha exists in the space between the black native subject and the white imperial master and is the representation of Brontë’s unquestioned complicity in imperial subjugation. Susan Meyer’s article, “Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of *Jane Eyre*” (1990), outlines a complex racial critique that relies on the symbolic blackness of Bertha’s body rather than her literal race. She notes that in Brontë’s work, she repeatedly makes references to gender and class oppression in relation to black oppression in the colonies. However, as Meyer points out, “What begins then as an implicit critique of British domination and identification with the oppressed collapses into merely an appropriation of the metaphor of ‘slavery’” (250). Unlike Spivak, to whom Meyer attributes the argument of unquestioned imperialism in the text, Meyer reads the novel’s

imperialism as ideology that has been questioned and then reaffirmed. In this reading, Bertha *becomes* black because it is the only way in which she is allowed to be visible, particularly because her visibility depends upon her subjugation.

In some critical approaches, Bertha becomes unmoored from the narrative and is used as a cypher for the imperial subject. Suvendrini Perera's recent reading makes connections between Bertha's body and Brontë's orientalist appropriation of the language and traditions of "sati," wherein a woman sacrifices herself on her husband's funeral pyre. The connection between this tradition and Bertha's death in the Thornfield fire is immediately apparent, but it is the nuanced reading of Brontë's feminism that is most impressive. As Perera states, "The texts figure their heroines' lives through the very mechanisms of social and sexual control repeatedly produced in colonial discourse . . . [T]he slender consciousness of a wider female oppression seems to be always finally repressed or denied by the objectification of the colonized or imagined 'oriental' female subject" (81-82). In this construction, we can read the novel as the purposeful subjugation of an imperialized body in pursuit of a white feminist utopia in which patriarchal structures are continually reinscribed.

Bertha's race is thus a cypher in the critical tradition. Though Rochester describes Bertha as "tall, *dark*, and majestic," (Brontë 260), I argue that an approach grounded in an understanding of racial signification in the British imperial context reveals that textual and contextual evidence best supports her identification as a white woman born in an English colony. This reading builds on the careful work that Sue Thomas has conducted that explicates the nineteenth century connotations of creole identity. In her reading, Thomas claims that "Brontë has carefully historicized the relationships among Bertha Mason

Rochester, Edward Fairfax Rochester and Jane Eyre” because her use of the tropes of madness and moral degeneracy are perfectly embodied in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ethnographies on white creoles (31). In these ethnographies, the prevailing opinion was that “[b]irth in the Caribbean supposedly naturalized character attributes brought about by ‘acclimation’ to the tropics” (33). These attributes were generally ones considered morally repugnant—slothfulness, pride, vanity, concupiscence. Thomas supports her claims about Brontë’s purposefulness by referring to letters written to Brontë’s editor, W. S. Williams, in which she discusses her recent readings on moral madness and their connections with her then recently published novel. In the quoted 1848 letter, Brontë concludes, “Mrs. Rochester, indeed, lived a sinful life before she was insane, but sin itself is a species of insanity” (35). Thus, Bertha’s creole identity is directly linked to her confinement because it is inherently a signifier of moral failure. H. Adlai Murdoch reads this use of the creole as an attempt “to contain the complexities of the Creole by negating these disturbing, dangerously indeterminate figures whose subjectivity is paradoxically both unacknowledged and restrained” (2). Without a doubt, the use of the creole subject is as much about Brontë proclaiming her British self-identity as it is about the horror of liminality. Moreover, Rochester’s marriage to Bertha, as a creole woman, represents a contamination of a true European bloodline with the depravity of the warmer creole blood. As a result, “Rochester’s confinement of Bertha sets a boundary of repudiation, marks a repression of his own racialized ‘contamination’..., and attempts to bury ‘in oblivion’ the tropical degeneracy of white women” (40). Rochester exposes his colonial prejudice when he exclaims, “Jane my little darling...you misjudge me again: it is not because she is mad that I hate her” (Brontë

257). Indeed, it is rather because she is inherently flawed by the racial impurity brought about by warmer climates. Jane Eyre's place in this story is to assist Rochester in the reinscription of a "healthy" imperialist patriarchy by becoming the pure-blooded European wife that he requires. If Bertha is her double in any way, it is in their shared use-value to Edward Rochester.

Thus far, I have discussed some of the ways that Bertha has been read, but in all of these readings, as well as the myriad others not mentioned here, Bertha functions solely as the sacrifice to Rochester's desires, rather than an actor in her own right. Instead of reading her as merely the sacrifice, I will turn to more recent theoretical engagements with gender to read her existence as generative and agentic.² I'd like to consider Lee Edelman's discussion of futurity and the death drive in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, and attempt to intertwine it with my discussion of Bertha in a productive way. He begins by dissecting the normative need for futurity, which is evident in the traditional kinship structures enacted by the white characters of this novel. The idea of "no future" is predicated on the recognition that a hope for future has been utterly removed as a space for queers and other non-normative figures to inhabit; it is as much a forced march to death as it is a choice to ignore reproduction as the only mode of continuance. Queers occupy the space of the death drive, "a place...of abjection expressed in the stigma, sometimes fatal, that follows from reading that figure literally...and strives, quite

² For a highly informative and appropriately informal conversation about the variety of ways in which queer time functions, see the *GLQ* roundtable discussion, "Theorizing Queer Temporalities" (2007), in which a representative gathering of queer theorists (including Edelman and Freeman) consider the reparative multiplicity queer temporality.

reasonably, given its unlimited faith in reason—to disassociate the queer” (3). This description perfectly encapsulates the position that Bertha has been placed in as an abjected body. Edelman does, however, go on to consider the possibility for queer intentionality: “[Q]ueerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place, accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure” (3). This intentionality, then, is where Bertha’s desire to be heard, if not integrated, is allowed proper expression. Her moments of interpolation, which I will be discussing in depth, function as disruptions that expose the inconsistencies of the world that she exists just outside of—and which Jane is desperate to become a part of.

But as Elizabeth Freeman argues in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, queer time is more than a rejection of futurity; it is a rejection of all of the structures that we consider to be necessary to normative life. Freeman focuses on the term “chrononormativity,” which represents the way in which we are conditioned so that “institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts” (3). The essence of chrononormativity depends on the group potential of humanity; the individual body must be convinced of its ability to maximize potential through cooperation. Through chrononormative maneuvering, “people are bound to one another, engrouped, made to feel coherently collective” (3). Chrononormativity is a way of organizing human output that both masquerades as choice and inspires traditional ideas concerning achievement. The larger chronobiopolitics of society take the human-machine and turns it to

institutional profit. It is through this maneuver, Freeman says, that members of said society fail to recognize the structures that keep them trapped inside of chrononormativity. She also discusses the very nineteenth-century preoccupation with the dialectic of domesticity and industrialization. The construction of the body politic around this dialectic “validated a set of feelings—love, security, harmony, peace, romance, sexual satisfaction, motherly instincts—in part by figuring them as timeless, as primal, as a human condition located in and emanating from the psyche’s interior” (5). As a result, the female domestic body becomes just as entangled in the observational system of chronobiopolitics, which places Bertha’s story, though completely unattached from any exterior community, firmly within the purview of chrononormative policing. That she is able to occasionally escape from this police state is a testament to her queer potential. As Freeman states, queer theory’s use of time “can produce new social relations and even new forms of justice that counter the chrononormative and chronobiopolitical” (10). Bertha’s interpolations are primarily in the form of temporal disruptions, and she often asserts herself in moments when the chrononormative illusion is at its most opaque—notably, when Jane the omniscient narrator has almost persuaded us, the readers, that her story is a tale of egalitarian marriage, rather than one entirely dependent on the subjugation of other human beings. Though Brontë has constructed a system of surveillance to control Bertha, a queer reading of the text allows one to address why Jane Eyre, with her intense feelings of loneliness and sentiment, is incapable of sustaining an affective relationship with the only foremother she knows.

Jane's inability to find solidarity with Bertha seems surprising once one considers that much of her internal monologue is predicated on the fact of her loneliness and uniqueness, and how much of her affect is expressed through the language of imprisonment and subjugation. From childhood, Jane characterizes herself as an outcast, left to her own devices, yet continually obstructed. The opening pages of the text paint an image of a sullen child with an unhealthy fascination with the macabre, but through the eyes of future-narrator Jane, her past becomes a text replete with the symbolism of obstructed affect. The book that she reads is described as melancholy, bleak, and shadowy (6), while her own reading of the text is that of an affective artwork: "Each picture told a story; mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting" (6-7). In these moments of affective pleasure, Jane is "happy: happy at least in my way" (7). Jane's "way" of happiness is predicated on a sense of solitary melancholia, as evidenced by the images that she describes as "death-white realms" in which she "formed an idea of my own...like all the half-comprehended notions that float dim through children's brains, but strangely impressive" (6). Though remote and cold, this is nevertheless a kind of beauty in which Jane finds companionship because it mirrors the feelings that she is unable to fully express. Her outcast status in the family is evident in her description of the Reeds, as their "dark skin" is contrasted with Jane's pale tone, as well as her explanation for Mrs. Reed's seeming hatred of her—"how could she really like an interloper *not of her race*...?" (13). Though Mrs. Reed is unlikely to be truly dark skinned, Brontë's use of "race" as a categorical

signifier is telling because of the novel's vexed relationship with colonial history, as well as the way it places Jane in the position of interloper, stranger, and foreigner.³

In recounting her time at Gateshead, Jane draws imagery of herself as friendless orphan, yet expresses a fully formed sense of her independent subjectivity: "*Speak I must; I had been trodden on severely, and must turn: but how? What strength had I to dart retaliation at my antagonist?*" (30). Though Jane claims to be incapable of accessing self-expression, it is truly the circumscription of her self-expression by Mrs. Reed that she rages against. In this scene, we see the final confrontation between the two women before Jane's movement to Lowood, and it primarily functions as an act of catharsis for Jane. Her discourse is animated by a conviction of the veracity of her vantage point, which inspires her to cry, "You think I have no feelings, and that I can do without one bit of love or kindness; but I cannot live so: and you have no pity" (30). This self-characterization of the artlessness of her rhetoric asks the reader to see her as an unmediated entity whose entire interaction with the world is as close as one can get to the always unreachable realm of affect.⁴

³ The conversations around queer affect are wide-ranging and ongoing, but my strongest influences for this project are Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003); Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003); Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010); and Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011).

⁴ Jane's use of the language of confinement is dependent on her continual use of metaphors of slavery, which, while a common trope of the time, nevertheless makes Jane's lack of sympathy toward a woman experiencing literal confinement more damning. The most clear discussions of this use of metaphor are Carl Plasa's *Critical Issues* volume on Charlotte Brontë (2004), in which he presents a chapter on "Incongruous Unions": Slavery and the Politics of Metaphor in *Jane Eyre*, and Carolyn Vellenga Berman's chapter on "Colonial Madness in *Jane Eyre*" in her book, *Creole Crossings: Domestic Fiction and the Reform of Colonial Slavery* (2006).

In fact, Jane's panicked stay in the red room perfectly encapsulates her vision of her own affective potential when she imagines a supernatural presence overseeing her cries—"I wiped my tears and hushed my sobs, fearful lest any sign of violent grief might waken a preternatural voice to comfort me, or elicit from the gloom some haloed face, bending over me with strange pity" (13). That an angel sent from Heaven to provide comfort is instead interpreted as a repressively fearful figure is telling. Even in her fear, Jane foregrounds her perception of the world through an affect utterly divorced from rationality and simultaneously rejects the communion with holiness that an angel symbolizes.

After her time in the red room, Jane's interaction with affective melancholy becomes strained. As she attempts to return to her old favorite, *Gulliver's Travels*, her enjoyment has fled: "[A]ll was eerie and dreary; ...I closed the book, which I dared no longer peruse, and put it on the table" (17). Though this is her favorite book, it is though Jane has suddenly become aware of having lost some form of courage in the red room. Her experience in the red room acts as a deterrent for her affective voice, though Lorri Nandrea's reading of this scene clearly explicates this experience as ultimately a moment of redemption through symbolic death, represented by her fear-fueled collapse into unconsciousness. Nandrea observes, "[T]he novel follows the logic of what Leo Bersani calls an 'aesthetic of redemption': experience itself is damaged and worthless, but is redeemed by an artistic product that transcends it" (120). Our narrator Jane presents the damaging experience of the red room as the beginning of her journey toward selfhood,

but it is in the act of reminiscing that Jane is able to construct a symbolic narrative out of the disparate events in her life. This is of tantamount importance to the affective connection that I am tracing between Jane and Bertha, because the narrative autobiography places the locus for construction in the voice of the reminiscing Jane herself. Within Jane's story, Bertha Mason's confined position creates for her a liminal space within the structure of autobiography. As Nandrea claims, "if the autobiography *records* the movement from sense to sign, from intensity to intention, the text also seems to *repeat* a different movement, perhaps one that addresses the sign to sense, or repeats intensity with intention" (122). For the binary pairing of Bertha and Jane, this function of the autobiography is one of the ways in which Bertha becomes both active agent and symbolic double. Though the text is foremost a record of her life, Jane's use of Bertha as an illustration allows her to become a ghostly, yet active presence in the novel; a signifier with a carbon-print signified. Although Nandrea's primary concern is with Jane's use of sentimental affect, it is Bertha's use of complementary affective language that most represents the monstrous uncertainty of this gothic bildungsroman.

In order to truly read Bertha, one needs to be able to understand the affective power of her movements, as her speech is consistently unintelligible. The affective is able to bleed through layers of consciousness to which conscious expression has no access. It is one of Bertha's only methods of interpolation, and she employs it in every interaction that she has with Jane. Indeed, in Nicholas de Villiers' reading of the generative potential of queer confinement, one of the major methods of rejecting

hegemonic control is through a refusal to be read. In particular, he is fascinated with “queer appropriations of forms typically linked to truth telling, the revelation of secrets, authenticity, and transparency, namely, the interview, the autobiography, the diary, and the documentary” (6). This appropriation forces the reader, listener, or other interpreter to engage with the proffered communication in a way that shifts agency onto the queer body. The speaker and listener are in a constant state of tension with each other, as “listening, silence, and speech are interdependent: *interlocution interpellates* the individual as speaking/listening subject” (27 emphasis original). I’m arguing that even though the novel’s autobiographical form can be read as a revelatory journey of self-discovery for Jane, its most important subplot is the story of queer self-expression, in an affective frame, for Bertha. Rather than being merely Jane’s “mad double” as she has been categorized so often, Bertha’s own autobiography shapes the main plot as a photographic negative to Jane’s story.

The centerpiece for much of the primary text is, of course, Jane’s constant misreading of Bertha’s presence at Thornfield.⁵ Her first intimation of an abnormal presence in the house occurs when she is being shown around by Mrs. Fairfax. She states, “While I paced softly on the last sound I expected to hear in so still a region, a laugh, struck my ear. It was a curious laugh; distinct, formal, mirthless. I stopped: the sound

⁵ This misreading has been addressed in a variety of studies, as the bibliography makes clear, but those studies have largely emerged from interactions with Jean Rhys’ 1966 novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In this novel, Rhys writes a fictionalized pre-history in which Bertha’s life is explored, as well as her relationship to Mr. Rochester. Though the novel is important, both for its own sake and for the renewed critical vigor that has been directed toward *Jane Eyre*, I have chosen not to engage with it here because I wanted to express how much of Bertha’s agency is already legible and present in the original text.

ceased, only for an instant; it began again louder: for at first, though distinct, it was very low” (91). Mrs. Fairfax’s quick answer, that it is merely a servant, Grace Poole, apparently satisfies Jane, despite the sheer oddity of the occurrence. Though Jane briefly wonders at Grace’s continued employment despite her behavior, she nevertheless brushes this question off, saying that “[h]er appearance always acted as a damper to the curiosity raised by her oral oddities: hard-featured and staid, she had no point to which interest could attach” (94). Jane here shows an astounding ability to maintain the status quo in two ways: first, by dismissing Grace based on her less than exciting appearance and her lower servant status, Jane engages in the same taxonomizing hierarchy that she frequently rails against in her family, at Lowood, and among Mr. Rochester’s friends, all of whom are her “betters”; secondly, as a result of this dismissal Jane is able to construct a narrative of her time at Thornfield in which her inequitable and uninformed romance with Mr. Rochester is merely the beginnings of a tale of self-respect and self-assertion in which feminist principles are rewarded with marriage.

In this romantic bildungsroman, Mr. Rochester’s circumspection takes on a tall, dark, and handsome appeal, and yet in his interactions with Jane he quite clearly articulates that he has a secret, that he is not a good person, and that his primary joy in her is that she provides catharsis. He tells her that “[people] will feel, too, that you will listen with no malevolent scorn of their indiscretion, but with a kind of innate sympathy; not the less comforting and encouraging because it is very *unobtrusive in its manifestations*” (116 emphasis added). I highlight his use of the term “unobtrusive”

because of how beautifully apropos it is in this context. Bertha is always and only obtrusive, both in Rochester's life and to his sanity. Although Jane is unaware at the time, her every action serves as a counterpoint to Bertha's behavior which, though found wanting in Rochester's eyes, is the only action that she can take from her imprisonment. Bertha is engaged in a struggle to be read, but she is constantly undermined by Rochester's ability to elide her existence. Indeed, even in her confinement, he still reads her as a purposeful seductress who is merely engaged in a long con; he believes that "to have a sullied memory was a perpetual bane" (117), seemingly forgetting that Bertha is in fact living and breathing above his head.

However, Bertha uses her ability to move spatially and aurally to resoundingly proclaim her existence. After Jane's initial observance of the "curious laugh," her next encounters with Bertha all take place at night, when the ambience reflects and complements Bertha's shadowy and tenuous grasp on her own existence. In both of these encounters, Jane's temporal perception is thrown off balance and she questions her own grasp on reality. Immediately prior to the scene in which Bertha sets fire to Rochester's bed, Jane narrates, "I hardly know whether I had slept or not after this musing; at any rate, I started wide awake on hearing a vague murmur, peculiar and lugubrious, which sounded, I thought, just above me" (126). Jane reads Bertha's murmur as sad and mournful, which puts her firmly within the purview of Jane's melancholy relationship to her affect. When Jane, frightened, asks "Who is there?," the answer does not come in words; rather, "something gurgled and moaned" (126). Jane hears sadness in Bertha's

utterances, a quick affective reading of the situation that, unfortunately, is not allowed to develop into conscious sympathy, for Rochester's needs are more immediately pressed on her consciousness. For that brief moment, however, Bertha's actions allow her to make an impression on the world outside of which she is forced to stand. Bertha's choices are disruptive here in multiple ways: she acts outside of normative boundaries of active time, her chosen speech act is virtually wordless, and she engages with the affective thematic of Jane's worldview without being seen or heard well enough to be properly read.

Bertha's legibility undergoes a steep decline as the novel progresses. In Jane's second nighttime interaction with Bertha, this time occurring during Blanche Ingram's visit to Thornfield, Bertha's cries become more audible and simultaneously less intelligible. At a time when Rochester's illusion must remain most stable, it comes closest to collapse as first Bertha's brother appears and refuses to be turned away, and then Bertha herself refuses to be silenced. From Jane's perspective, Bertha is, once again, a non-entity, though her affective influence is no less noticeable:

Awakening in the dead of night, I opened my eyes on her disk—silver-white and crystal-clear. It was beautiful, but too solemn: I half rose, and stretched my arm to draw the curtain.

Good God! What a cry!

The night—its silence—its rest, was rent in twain, by a savage, a sharp, a shrilly sound that ran *from end to end of Thornfield Hall*. (175 emphasis added)

Though Bertha herself has little capacity for movement, her refusal to be silenced represents an interpolation into a social landscape that has been closed to her for many years. Jane's inability to see her is, I believe, directly correlated to Bertha's ability to make herself heard, but not understood. This confusion—in which Bertha reaches for acknowledgement without seeming to realize the consequences of being seen—reaches a final climax at Jane and Rochester's wedding ceremony, which Jane experiences as a tragedy, but which Bertha feels as a moment of hostile visibility. Her legibly queer body is consumed by Rochester's need for her as a perverse symbol, and she is, as a result, subsumed by his pathology.

Bertha is by turns described as a maniac, a lunatic, and an animal; her movements are masculine and inhuman and her body is presented as unfeminine and inherently abject—"She was a big woman, in stature almost equaling her husband and corpulent besides; showed virile force in the contest—more than once she almost throttled him, athletic as he was" (250). "Virile" is a specifically masculine signifier, while Bertha's physical size is presented as comparable to her husband, who is not a small man. The pugilistic language places Bertha firmly outside of the feminine domestic sphere and thus irredeemable. Jane's allegiances are clearly delineated in this interaction, and when she, a few pages later, ruminates on the events of the morning, Bertha has already become a static deterrent to her happiness, rather than an active participant in this drama of colonization. Jane expresses her feelings about the occurrences, saying, "I would not ascribe vice to him; I would not say he had betrayed me: but the attribute of stainless

truth was gone from his idea” (252-253). Rochester’s only sin, it seems, is lying; locking up and silencing his wife has little to no effect on his moral capabilities in a world in which he holds the most privileged position. When we, as readers, finally come face to face with Bertha as more than a ghostly presence in the house, the immediate impression we receive is of an uncontrolled animal. Read through the eyes of Jane, Bertha becomes a feral specter.

Having disrupted the narrative action twice within the text previously, Bertha now disrupts the ceremony and pageantry of one of the most important occasions of chrononormative continuity: the wedding. Her interpolations in this scene are at their most violent and intelligible just as her slim claim to legitimacy is being snatched from her. In her opening description of Bertha’s person, Jane says,

In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal; but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (250)

Bertha is no longer person, but *thing*, now only legible as likely animal and barely human, and it is here that Jane most easily elides her humanity. This monstrous reading is disconcerting in the face of Bertha’s attempts at intelligibility. Though Jane does manage a surface reading of her, stating, “The maniac bellowed: she parted her shaggy locks from her visage . . . [.] I recognized well that purple face—those bloated features,” this reading

does not include a moment of solidarity or empathy, as Jane instead chooses to retreat behind Rochester for protection. This scene is filled with so many significant images of subjugation and silencing, yet Jane does not read them as such, and one wonders how Brontë intended them to be read.

Valerie Beattie makes an interesting argument that Brontë is much more unsympathetic to the hegemonic influences of Rochester and Jane than critics have often allowed. She says, “The double downfall (of Rochester and Thornfield) that Bertha single-handedly brings about is inexplicable without an informed concept of agency/power relations. Brontë’s overlapping of madness and power indicates a deliberate undermining of the disciplinary force of confinement” (495), placing the narrator and the author at two distinctly different points of view. Brontë’s characterization of Bertha, in this light, becomes a critique of the structures that bind her and their effect on the body, rather than a condemnation of Bertha herself. I bring this argument forward because it acknowledges Bertha’s agency, even while it fails to confront the clear sympathy that Brontë expresses toward Rochester through her characterization of his spoken autobiography in the wake of Bertha’s discovery. When Jane finally emerges from her room after learning of Rochester’s first wife, she is immediately confronted by Rochester’s demand for forgiveness. This moment presents Jane’s betrayal of Bertha’s affective potential, as she says, “Reader!—I forgave him at the moment, and on the spot. There was such deep remorse in his eye, such true pity in his tone, such manly energy in his manner” (255). Brontë’s feminist utopia does not

allow for catharsis for marginalized women, as Bertha is clearly not included in the remorse that Jane reads in Rochester's face. His preceding explanation of his treatment of her is never connected with any regret that does not specifically affect Jane's wellbeing. Rochester's narrative of his relationship with Bertha repeatedly places him in the position of an innocent, chained to a woman that he was "cheated into espousing" (249). He describes himself as a man caught under an alluring spell, saying, "I was not sure of the existence of one virtue in her nature: I had marked neither modesty, nor benevolence, nor candour, nor refinement in her mind or manners—and, I married her" (260). Though Bertha does bring about the downfall of Thornfield, her destruction has little lasting effect on Rochester. One can connect his surviving the fire and subsequent happiness to the life cycle of a phoenix, as he seems eminently capable of recovering from his contact with her colonial mystique. This is, of course, the second time that his life has supposedly been destroyed by Bertha, and the outcome remains the same—as Rochester's happiness is assured, Bertha becomes steadily more monstrous.

The question of monstrosity is one that pervades narratives concerned with race and imperialism in nineteenth-century England. Chih-Ping Chen's article, "'Am I a Monster?': 'Jane Eyre' Among the Shadows of Freaks," discusses the role of freakshows and monstrosity in the nineteenth century and analyzes the way that Mr. Rochester uses the language of the ringmaster, or host, to manipulate the audience into sympathy for his perspective. Chen states that "the Rochester-Bertha freak show is but one of the freak show metaphors underlining Jane's struggle toward desired female selfhood" (369). In

essence, this is a story about Jane's attempt to move herself away from identification with the monstrous; as such, "Jane's journey in status from being discriminated against as a 'bad animal'...to becoming a British 'lady' reveals the metaphoric connection of the struggles of a woman to assert her 'self' and freakery as a cultural discourse" (369).

Chen is willing to admit that, in marrying Rochester, Jane moves from subjugated to imperialist. "The host-exhibit-viewer dynamics" that characterize Jane's interaction with Bertha and that drives the novel "thus configures[s] Jane's struggle for empowerment in both Jane's fictional relations with her patriarchs and her textual relations with her reader. Her involvement in this dynamic, however, makes her susceptible to adopting an imperial viewing position" (376).⁶ That she does so is evident in her final decision to return from her familial country refuge to the representation of institutionalized patriarchal imperialism that is the recently destroyed Thornfield.

Upon Jane's return, Thornfield's social importance is evidenced in the narrative of the innkeeper; though he knows nothing of her connection to the house, its existence, or non-existence, Thornfield holds enough significance to be immediately relevant to even a perceived stranger. That Bertha's story is then propagated by an innkeeper whose relation to Rochester's story is minimal, and to Bertha's is nonexistent, yet he somehow becomes the appropriate medium to chronicle Bertha's last days. The narrative structure is undoubtedly there to lend the reader, and Jane, an outsider's view of the drama that has

⁶ Two foundational readings of gothic horror and monstrosity are Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980) and Judith Halberstam's *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (1995). In both readings, the disparate conventions of the gothic tradition are considered in a unified manner and the body horror inherent in the gothic tradition is thoroughly critiqued.

been her life at Thornfield and to give it a dramatic tension that a mere recitation from Rochester wouldn't. The novel doubles down on Bertha's inarticulateness here, silencing even her gurgles and moans and ceding her story to a stranger. Her final escape is unsurprising, especially because it is rapidly followed by her death. Her attempt to be heard increases in volume as its audience diminishes and is further removed from the center of the narrative; the innkeeper states that she was "shouting out till they could hear her a mile off; I saw her and heard her with my own eyes" (365). Unfortunately Jane, the person who might finally have heard Bertha properly, is much too far away to hear and, it seems, much too distant to learn from Bertha's demise. The innkeeper's opinion of the incident, and Rochester's subsequent injury could be her own: "Some say it was a just judgment on him for keeping his first marriage secret, and wanting to take another wife while he had one living: but I pity him" (365). In this view, loss of a hand and one's eyesight is more than punishment enough for causing the loss of another's life and freedom.

Though Bertha is clearly more than Jane Eyre's suppressed psyche, it is evident that they have an interrelationship that grows out of their ability to access their affective selves. In Adrienne Rich's classic reading of the text, she places the novel as a whole into the liminal space of genre, stating that the novel takes place "between the realm of the given, that which is changeable by human activity, and the realm of the fated, that which lies outside human control: between realism and poetry. The world of the tale is above all a 'vale of soul-making'" (470). This reading prioritizes Jane's sensibilities which, as I've

argued, are governed by an internally-focused locus of sympathy. While Jane's narrative is completed by her development of a fully formed proto-feminist subjectivity, its existence is nevertheless wholly dependent on the utter destruction of a colonized and confined body—a body that is in solidarity with her affective desires. In dramatizing the illegibility of queer bodies, their vulnerability to confinement and violence, and the broader culture's refusal to hear their cries of pain as either human or meaningful, the novel tells a paradoxical story—one in which feminist agency can only be achieved through identification with the hegemonic narratives of domesticity and marriage. As Jane allows herself to also be subsumed within Rochester's sphere of influence, her connection to the abject mode of affective feeling begins to lose its potency, and Bertha's loss of contact is as much a result of Rochester's force as it is a result of Jane's weakness in response to him.

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